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ABSTRACT

Schools need effective systems for supporting teachers in meeting students' individual needs and responding to school-wide problems. The Teacher Assistance Team (TAT) model is a school-based problem-solving group that supports teachers by analyzing student, classroom, or school problems and creating alternative strategies for resolving those problems. Presented here are guidelines for establishing teams, operating procedures for contacting teams, preparing for meetings, conducting 30-minute team meetings, following up, and the process for training and developing teams. TAT is a cost-effective model that requires no additional staff. For 25 years schools throughout the United States have successfully implemented TAT. Research data have demonstrated its value for meeting the needs of individual students, reducing inappropriate special education referrals, and facilitating communication and collaboration among faculty and parents. Adapting the model for meeting China's universal education goals is recommended. (Author/EMK)

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Chapter Twelve

Teacher Assistance Teams: A System for Supporting Classroom Teachers in China or the United States

Margaret Van Dusen Pysh & James C. Chalfant

Abstract

Schools need effective systems for supporting teachers in meeting student's individual needs and responding to school wide problems. The Teacher Assistance Team (TAT) model is a school-based problem solving group which supports teachers by analyzing student, classroom, or school problems and creating alternative strategies for resolving those problems (Chalfant, Pysh, & Moultrie, 1979; Chalfant & Pysh, 1993). This article includes guidelines for establishing teams, operating procedures for contacting teams, preparing for meetings, conducting 30 minute team meetings, following-up, and the process for training and developing teams. TAT is a cost-effective model, requiring no additional staff. For 25 years schools throughout the United States have successfully implemented TAT. Research data have demonstrated its value for meeting the needs of individual students, reducing inappropriate special education referrals, and facilitating communication and collaboration among faculty and parents.

Chinese and U.S. schools share some common concerns; both are seeking more effective and efficient methods of creating quality education and helping each student reach their potential (Daping, 1997). In both countries, the major service provider for students is the classroom teacher and an insufficient number of teachers are trained to meet students' individual needs (Armfield, 1992; Boqi, 1996). Schools in both countries also share a constant demand for effective and reasonably inexpensive methodologies (Mu, Yang & Armfield, 1993). Basic education in China is becoming primarily a local enterprise which must take the realities and needs of each locality intoaccount (Daping, 1997; Ming, 1996), while education in the U.S. has moved toward site-based management for similar reasons (David, 1995).

The Teacher Assistance Team (TAT) model is a school-based problem solving group which supports teachers by analyzing student, classroom, or school problems and creating alternative strategies for resolving those problems (Chalfant, Pysh, & Moultrie, 1979). This article provides an overview of the

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Teacher Assistance Team model and how it can be implemented in Chinese or American schools.

Teacher Assistance Teams can be used to address many problems or issues which arise in a school. TAT provides a forum where teachers engage in a positive, systematic problem-solving process concerning students at risk, classroom, parent or schoolwide concerns. Students who are at risk for failure in the classroom may include those with learning and/or behavior problems, or disabilities of various kinds. The needs of disadvantaged, transient, or gifted students and general instructional or curricular issues also may be addressed by teams (Chalfant & Pysh, 1993). The TAT model is particularly useful in schools which lack trained specialists or financial resources. TAT is very cost effective and can be implemented quickly since no additional staff is needed and the procedures have been designed to minimize time and paperwork. The TAT process can be used as a first step to help students who are at risk, support special education, or address total classroom or schoolwide problems (Chalfant & Pysh, 1981).

A TAT team typically consists of a core of three general education teachers representing various grade levels or disciplines. The teacher requesting assistance is a fourth and equal member of the team. Teams also may include special education personnel, administrators, parents or students themselves, as appropriate (Dettmer, Thurston, Dyck, 1993). For best efficiency and effectiveness, teams should not include more than six team members per meeting.

How Should TAT Operate?

The operating procedures for TAT are flexible and vary somewhat from school to school to fit each school's needs and culture (Phillips & McCullough, 1990). However, the majority of TAT teams utilize the six critical procedures presented here (Chalfant & Pysh, 1993). See Figure 1.

1. **Contacting The Team** (10-15 minutes). When a teacher, administrator, or parent wishes to contact the team for collaboration/assistance, they answer four questions on a one-page form called: ***Request For Collaboration/Assistance***. Because this article was written to assist schools in China, the sample case of Honmin Lee, a third grade male Chinese student, was created by a Chinese teacher (Y.W. Xu, personal communication, May, 1997).

Describe what you would like the student to do that he/she does not presently do.

1) To listen attentively and follow directions
2) To stay on task and complete both classroom and homework assignments
3) To catch up with his classmates in reading and math.

Describe what you have done to help the student cope with their problems.

1) Moved him away from the student he liked to talk to in the class
2) Kept him after school for additional instruction
3) Assigned a student to help him with his class work
4) Sent a written homework assignment reminder to hisparents
5) Called his parents to ask them to monitor their child's homework.

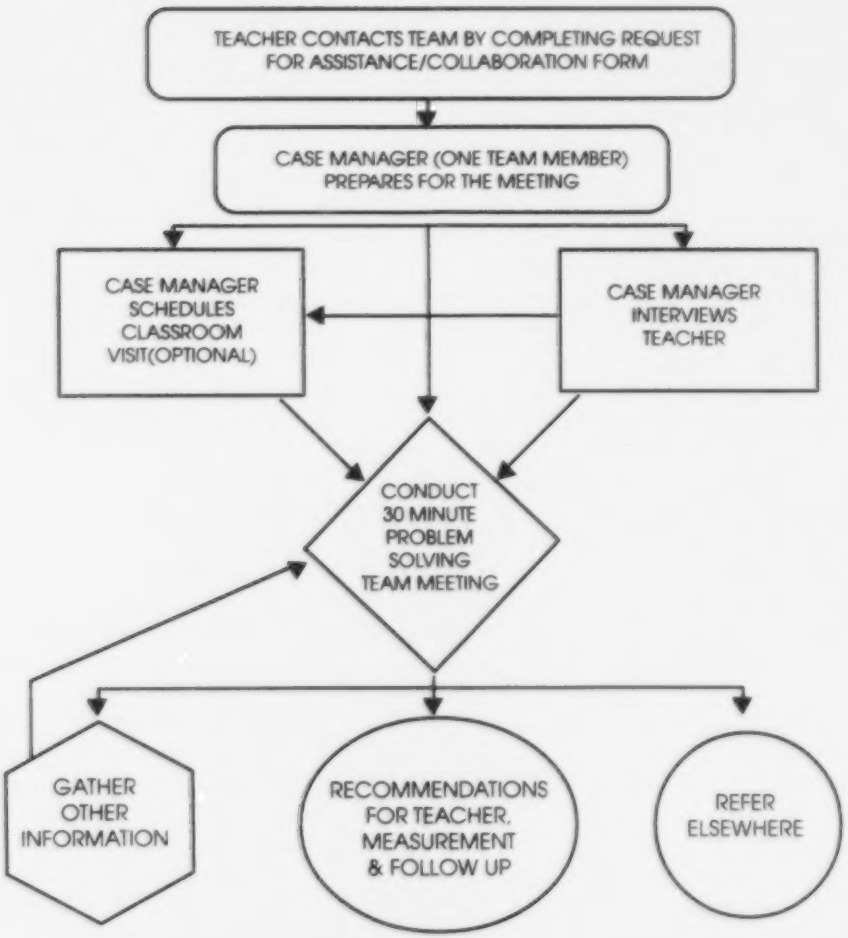
TEACHER CONTACTS TEAM BY COMPLETING REQUEST FOR ASSISTANCE/COLLABORATION FORM
CASE MANAGER (ONE TEAM MEMBER) PREPARES FOR THE MEETING
CASE MANAGER SCHEDULES CLASSROOM VISIT(OPTIONAL)
CASE MANAGER INTERVIEWS TEACHER
CONDUCT 30 MINUTE PROBLEM SOLVING TEAM MEETING
GATHER OTHER INFORMATION
RECOMMENDATIONS FOR TEACHER, MEASUREMENT & FOLLOW UP
REFER ELSEWHERE

Figure 1. The Teacher Assistance Team Process

Please describe the student's strengths and needs.

Strengths	Needs
1) Good attendance	1) He is behind other students in the class in math and reading
2) Able to work well with other students	2) Does not follow directions for class assignments
3) Can stay on task when interested	3) Does not stay on task more than a few minutes
4) Seems to have normal ability or above	4) Does not complete assignments at school or at home
	5) Avoids school work by disturbing others and making noise

What other information should we know?

Both parents are full-time factory workers. They have rotating night work shifts. They are concerned with their child's problems in school and have punished the child for not completing assignments.

2. **Preparing For The Meeting** (15 minutes). The team leader assigns one team member as case manager and they:

a) reviews the information on the request form;
b) constructs a visual problem interaction diagram of the problem displaying and integrating the information from the request form into a reasonable guess (see Figure 2); and
c) lists questions which need to be clarified with the teacher.

The case manager routes the request form and diagram to the other team members who review all materials and write additional questions.

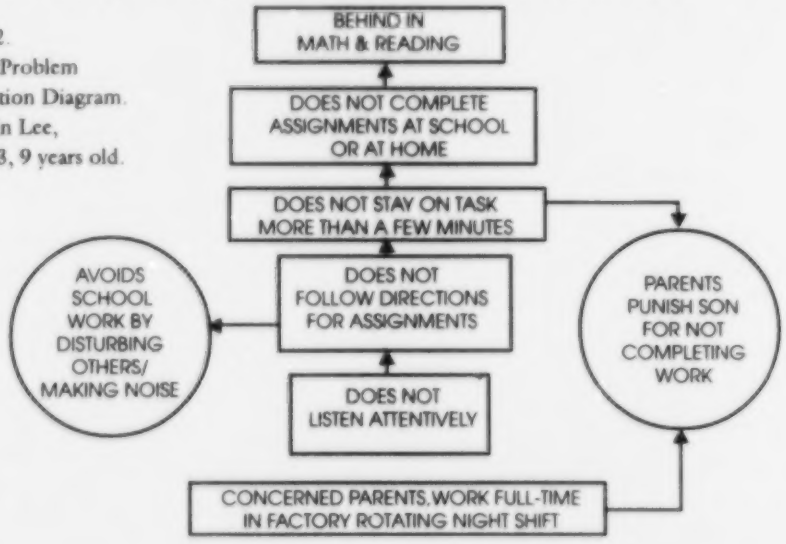
BEHIND IN MATH & READING
DOES NOT COMPLETE ASSIGNMENTS AT SCHOOL OR AT HOME
DOES NOT STAY ON TASK MORE THAN A FEW MINUTES
AVOIDS SCHOOL WORK BY DISTURBING OTHERS/ MAKING NOISE
DOES NOT FOLLOW DIRECTIONS FOR ASSIGNMENTS
PARENTS PUNISH SON FOR NOT COMPLETING WORK
DOES NOT LISTEN ATTENTIVELY
CONCERNED PARENTS, WORK FULL-TIME IN FACTORY ROTATING NIGHT SHIFT

Figure 2. Sample Problem Interaction Diagram. Honmin Lee, Grade 3, 9 years old.

3. **Interviewing The Teacher and Classroom Visitation** (15-20 minutes). The case manager interviews the teacher to ask the questions the team has raised or to clarify information. For example, the case manager or team members might ask in this case "Exactly how far behind is the student in math and reading? What kinds of directions does he have trouble following?" Observing the student in the classroom can be useful in gaining a better understanding of a situation but often is unnecessary if the issues are clarified during the interview.

When the team meets, all team members are familiar with the issues to be resolved. This preparation process allows team meeting time to be devoted to problem-solving, NOT problem sharing

4. **Conducting The Meeting** (30 minutes). The team meeting requires 30 minutes and typically is held either before school, during the lunch hour, or after school. This is the first time the requesting teacher and team all meet together. The agenda for the meeting consists of six steps:

Step One. *Reach agreement on the problem (5 min.)*. This step is usually completed before the meeting through the diagram and interview process during meeting preparation (see Figure 2). These few minutes allow for a review and update to reach final consensus on the nature of the problem if needed.

Step Two. *Negotiate one or two instructional or behavioral objectives (3 min.)*. In the sample case, the teacher might select a goal such as:

(a) to listen to directions in reading group and be able to repeat them accurately to a classmate or

(b)to stay on task in math group for 15 minutes during independent seatwork time

The key to successful goal selection is to identify a goal which is specific, measurable, and sufficiently limited so that it is reasonable for the teacher and the student to achieve. It is essential that the teacher selects the goal since they will be implementing the plan and knows the student and the situation best.

Step Three. *Brainstorm alternative suggestions (10 min.)*. The teacher and team engage in a brief brainstorm process usually creating 8-32 ideas in 10 minutes. The success of brainstorming depends on the specificity of the goal and the ability of the team to generate reasonable alternatives by staying on task, without commenting or elaborating unnecessarily.

Step Four. *Teacher selects methods to try (2 min.)*. The teacher selects the suggestions to try knowing which techniques best fit this student and this situation and that they will be implementing the plan.

Step Five. *Write an elaborated/refined plan and decide how to measure success (8 min.)*. The final plan is summarized on one page with responsibilities established and methodology elaborated so that all team members are clear about who will be doing what, when, and how. A system also is developed for measuring progress.

Step Six. Plan follow-up (2 min.) The team's last decision during this first meeting is to determine when to meet again to discuss the progress on this case. The teacher selects a date for the follow-up meeting from two to six weeks from the date of the first meeting.

5. **Implementing the Recommendations** (2-6 weeks). The teacher implements the recommendations within the classroom and measures the student's progress.

6. **Following Up Recommendations** (2-6 weeks). The teacher returns to the entire team to report on the student's progress within 2 to 6 weeks. If the plan is not working, the team and teacher revise the plan by modifying the goal or the methods. In some cases, it may be necessary to gather additional information or to refer the student for further evaluation or other services. If the plan is working, the teacher is reinforced and a maintenance plan is devised.

How Effective Is TAT?

During the past 20 years data have been gathered to evaluate the effectiveness and efficiency of the TAT model. Studies have been conducted on:

(a) the kinds of intervention goals selected by teams;
(b) improvement of student performance;
(c) impact on special education services;
(d) teachers' reactions to teams; and
(e) factors related to team effectiveness (Chalfant & Pysh, 1989).

An overview of these results are presented here:

1. Nearly 60% of the goals of beginning teams were directed toward improving student classroom behavior, work habits, interpersonal problems, attention deficiencies. The number of instructional goals increases after the behavior and discipline problems are resolved in schools.
2. Academic achievement is increased through team intervention.
3. Teams were effective in reducing the number of students referred to special education resulting in reduced costs in time and money.
4. The vast majority of teachers believe teams helped them analyze and resolve classroom problems.
5. Factors related to team success include principal support, team members' interest and dedication, and teacher support.

How Can a Team be Developed in My School?

Anyone can initiate the development of a team in a school (Chalfant & Pysh, 1981). The first step is to familiarize the principal with the purpose of the team, who the members are, how the team functions, and how the team can help students, teachers, and parents in the school (Friend & Cook, 1996).

The second step is to recruit the school faculty to try and obtain their interest in creating a problem-solving team for the school. The TAT model

should be presented as an experiment to determine whether it can be helpful to the school.

The third step is to conduct a 6-hour initial workshop to train faculty in the team operating procedures and adapt or develop the forms to be used by the team. Participants can be divided into teams of three to-six persons. Initially, each participant fills out a Request for Assistance and Collaboration. Requests are then exchanged between tables. Each group operates as a functioning team to gain group collaborative experience in the following aspects of the model:

(a) accurately and succinctly describing student needs and classroom problems;
(b) analyzing and conceptualizing student needs through a visualization diagramming process;
(c) applying communication principles for interviewing teachers and functioning on teams;
(d) conducting efficient and effective 30-minute problem solving meetings in six steps (refer to the section on conducting the meeting); and
(e) having the teachers from the school develop a plan for establishing a team in their school.

The fourth step is to conduct a six-hour follow-up workshop which usually occurs four to six months after initial training. The content of follow up workshops varies depending on the level of team development. The follow up workshop is designed to identify the questions, problems, or issues the teams have encountered and provide recommendations and solutions. This workshop makes it possible for teams to share their successes and problems and build a network among teams for communication, problem solving, and support.

Conclusions

Twenty five years of research has demonstrated that the TAT model works (Chalfant & Pysh, 1989). It seems to work because:

(a) teams consist of respected groups of peers who work well together (Johnson & Johnson, 1994);
(b) individual teachers identify their own needs (Parish & Arends, 1983);
(c) teachers select the goal and intervention strategy they want to use (Friend & Cook, 1996); and
(d) follow-up meetings are mandatory and administrators support the team members' efforts (Maeroff, 1993).

A Teacher Assistance Team serves as an effective preventive system to help teachers with any at-risk student; a support system to assist a school in becoming a collaborative environment (Johnson & Pugach, 1996); and a first step in identifying potential special education students. Most importantly, the TAT process supports teachers in learning how to analyze problems and individualize instruction to maximize progress for any student.

China has set a national goal of achieving two basics in education :

1. universal 9-year compulsory education and
2. eradicating illiteracy (Boqi, 1996; Yan, 1997).

The Teacher Assistance Team process could support Chinese schools in planning and achieving these longterm goals with a practical, inexpensive school-based system for educators which is founded on the fundamental concepts of the power of collective thought and the need for student-centered teaching (Boqi, 1996; On, 1996).

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